

Financial woes force drug treatment program to close its Columbia facility

The Tampa Tribune - Wednesday, February 26, 1992

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Straight Inc., a St. Petersburg-based drug treatment program accused of abusive practices against clients, will close its Columbia facility because of financial problems, a spokeswoman said Tuesday.

""We made a decision to close the program because of financial reasons, as many other health-care organizations have had to do," spokeswoman Joy Margolis said.

The organization opened the Maryland program about six months ago, after dropping its attempt to regain an operating license in neighboring Virginia amid allegations it was abusing patients.

Straight, headquartered in St. Petersburg, has been the subject of numerous complaints and lawsuits locally and in other states stemming from the program's controversial treatment practices.

The program will try to place its Maryland clients elsewhere prior to its closure Feb. 28, according to a letter sent to Maryland officials Monday by Bernadine Braithwaite, Straight's national director.

In an interview at the Columbia center last week, Eugene J. Nieto, executive director of the center, said that negative publicity about the program was steering clients to other facilities.

Straight does not plan to close any of its five remaining treatment centers the organization operates in four states, including Florida, Margolis said.

Since its arrival in Columbia on July 29, the program's enrollment dropped from 60 clients to 31. Clients are charged a one-time fee of \$19,000.

Straight's facility in Springfield, Va., was ordered closed early last year after a series of violations that included the failure to report promptly the alleged sexual abuse of a 13-year-old client by a 19-year-old also in the program.

Virginia monitors also found inadequate health records of employees and clients, inadequate fire safety procedures and a lack of any educational programs for school-aged children undergoing drug treatment.

The program uses intensive peer pressure and a 12-step program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous to rehabilitate adolescent drug users, according to Straight literature.

During the past 10 years, the organization has agreed to pay tens of thousands of dollars to former patients who complained of being held against their will.

But Straight officials said the complaints stemmed from treatment practices no longer used.

Edition: *FLORIDA*

Section: *ST. PETERSBURG*

Page: *2*

Index Terms: *STRAIGHT INCORPORATED MARYLAND USA ; DRUG TREATMENT FACILITY CLOSING*

Record Number: *257*

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